Chapter 1 – The Facets of Aging

"Age is a question of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."

Satchel Paige (1906–82), U.S. baseball pitcher

This resource manual defines seniors as adults aged 60 years and older. The characteristics and needs of older adults ages 60 and above are unique and diverse. As Richard Ambrosius, marketing consultant, stated, "Older adults have one thing in common: they're all different." However, librarians need be aware of certain facets of the aging process that may affect planning and developing services for older adults. This chapter will attempt to provide the reader with a better understanding of the aging process and how libraries can contribute to improving the quality of life for seniors.

While no blanket characterizations can be made about senior adults, we can safely say aging brings with it some physical and psychological changes. Physical aging alters energy levels, affects stature, mobility, and coordination; alters physical appearance; and increases susceptibility to physical and mental illness. Our society sometimes seems to dwell on the changes and the affects they may have rather than on the individual person. Age-related changes occur at different rates for different people. Essentially, aging is a highly individual experience.

Since our government offers citizens the option of receiving social security payments at the age of 65, many Americans consider 65 as the age when people begin their "senior years." However, many researchers believe this is detrimental to society as a whole for the following reasons:

- Age-related changes within any one individual function category can differ greatly. For instance, intelligence and memory change in a complex manner rather than in a generalized decline.

- Age-related changes differ greatly from one individual to another. Just as children reach their projected growth percentiles at different times, so too do people reach their "senior years" at different times.

- No sharp differences occur either physically or psychologically when a person reaches 65 years of age. Biological aging is the result of many processes that progress at different rates. Aging is a gradual process, with maturity and wisdom compensating for loss of physical abilities.

In any given person, some mental functions diminish with aging, while others increase

or remain constant. For instance, visual acuity may decrease while vocabulary increases, and habits attained in childhood or young adulthood remain relatively constant.

On an emotional and psychological level, aging can bring wisdom, experience, and personal peace. It can also bring a sense of loss. Older adults may have negative reactions to the changes in their appearances and their abilities to function without assistance (even to the extent of having to wear hearing or visual aids). Older adults who lose employment (and income), a spouse, or close friends can experience anger and depression.

Aging is a double-edged sword, with both negative and positive aspects. While many social stereotypes of older adults may dwell on the negative aspects of aging, older Americans in the 21st century experience better health, have more secure incomes, live longer, and are more self-reliant than previous generations.

Researchers point to a number of factors that will enable adults to experience successful aging. Among these are proper diet, good humor, and exercising one's body and mind. In fact, there are scientists who believe that human beings have a built-in "biological clock," which would run for 130 years if no diseases or illnesses affected the body.

While a healthy diet, adequate exercise, and the avoidance of tobacco consumption can deter some aspects of what many consider normal aging, some changes are inevitable, or gene-controlled, and cannot be avoided easily. Hair-loss, changes in skin appearance, and the natural deterioration of internal organs come to mind. Perhaps the most noticeable changes one experiences as one ages are those that affect the senses. Consider the impact any or all of the changes discussed below may have on an individual.

- Vision is the sense that is often the first to be affected by age. The pupil becomes smaller, leading to less light reaching the retina, which causes the field of vision to shrink. The lens and cornea become less transparent, and these physical changes make it difficult to shift focus from near to far. In addition, it becomes increasingly difficult to adjust to changes in light and color. Older eyes have a harder time assimilating violet light, making it difficult to see blues, greens, and violets. The ability to judge distance and depth perception is also often lost.

- Hearing loss begins about age 20. The loss of ability to hear high frequencies is gradual, but results in older listeners not being able to hear some frequencies no matter how loud. As a result, older people find listening to music with more low-pitched sounds and uniform intensity more enjoyable. In addition, background noise is more distracting to older listeners, which can impact speech communication.

- Taste buds start to diminish at about the age of fifty. People who are thirty have 245 papilla or taste buds. By the age of seventy, only about 88 remain. The "salty" and "sweet" taste buds are usually the most affected, which is why some older people tend to "over-salt" or "over-sweeten" foods.

- The sense of smell is one sense that seems to remain "intact" for the longest time with most people. However, when it does diminish, it makes tasting even more

difficult. It also poses a serious safety concern since such a loss could be so severe that someone might not be able to smell a gas leak or smoke from a fire.

- Touch and dexterity are also affected as people age. For some, it becomes difficult to detect extremes in temperature and to feel vibration, pressure, and pain. There are also physical changes that make knees and elbows feel stiff, and muscles may become weaker, making it more difficult for some people to lift heavy objects or even themselves.

Libraries can help accommodate seniors with sensory loss by considering the following guidelines when planning services or programs and designing library spaces.

Vision

1. Use obvious color contrasts when preparing print documents. Avoid using violet hues in print publications.

2. Provide library card applications and other print materials in large print. Be sure that the paper has a matte finish rather than a glossy finish.

3. Allow the person extra time to complete reading and writing tasks.

4. Control glare in the library. If there are areas within the library in which glare cannot be eliminated completely, be sure that the large print material is not housed there. Note: Mounting posters on transparent glass will alert patrons to the presence of glass doors or windows.

5. Add task lighting units in reading areas.

6. If presenting a slide show in which there are breaks between slides, use a dark slide for the transition, rather than allowing bright light to show.

7. Provide large computer monitors and closed circuit televisions (CCTVs). If funding and staffing permit, consider purchasing screen enlarging software and screen reading software.

Hearing Loss

1. Avoid shouting to someone who has a hearing loss; rather, speak distinctly and in a low tone. If you have a tendency to speak quickly, slow down, taking a pause between sentences. Be mindful not to cover your mouth when you speak.

2. Talk face to face with the person. Although the person probably does not read lips, he or she will be able to pick up conversational facial cues.

3. Try rewording questions using different vowels or consonants.

4. If appropriate, use visual aids when instructing persons with a hearing loss.

5. Do not attempt to speak over a film or a radio.

6. If setting up classes or programs for persons with hearing losses, be sure the area does not have background noise.

Touch/Physical Limitations

1. Be sure your library's flooring has good traction. Carpets or weather mats should be firmly tacked down.

2. Be sure faucet handles turn easily, doors open freely, and handrails are available.

3. Be sure chairs have arms and are sturdy. People who have difficulty getting up may need the arms to push against when getting up from the chair.

4. Large libraries may consider purchasing scooters.

5. Purchase large grip pens and pencils for patrons to use when filling out forms.

6. Purchase expanded keyboards or trackballs for persons with diminished dexterity.

Ageism: Treading Through Stereotypes

Aging is also a social process. Individuals see themselves fulfilling many roles – parent, spouse, friend, employee, volunteer, and others. There is a degree of security that accompanies these roles. Throughout life the field of roles for which we are eligible is constantly changing. Few 70-year-olds can take on the role of new parent, while few young adults can attain the role of "retiree." Individuals must adapt to the changing roles in their lives. How society responds to aging – through personal interactions, the media, and social and political policy – can impact one's ability and willingness to adapt to new roles.

To some degree, many people associate old age with wisdom, warmth, and "goodness." However, the public also tends to associate aging with illness, unattractiveness, and dependence. Such generalizations lead to ageism. Lois Lamden, the author of *Elderlearning*, states that ageism is the most ironic of all prejudices, since we are all headed toward old age.

Ageism and age discrimination occur when individuals or agencies have closely held beliefs about the abilities (or disabilities) of older adults, and either avoid seniors or deny them participation. The latter is most blatant, and less common in libraries. However, ignoring the needs of older adults and the value they can bring to the

library by not targeting programs and services to them is a form of discrimination libraries must avoid.

Many myths and stereotypes exist regarding aging and older adults. The following quiz may serve as a tool to test one's perception of aging.

Myths and Realities of Aging

1. The older population is growing and diversifying.

    Reality. The older population is very ethnically diverse and is growing. By 2030, 25% of the older population will be minorities.

2. Many older people are sick or frail.

    Myth. Data indicates that at some time, 20% of those over sixty will be in nursing homes, and only 5% of those people will become permanent residents. Only 25% of those 85 or older are institutionalized.

3. Memory impairment is uncommon in older adults.

    Reality. Only 4.4% of persons 65 or older have memory impairments.

4. Most seniors have some type of health problem.

    Myth. Seventy-two percent of seniors report that they are extremely healthy.

5. Older people are lonely.

    Myth. People over 65 reported loneliness much less often than those under 25.

6. It's harder to learn new tasks as you age.

    Myth and Reality. Some seniors require more time to learn new tasks; others do not. In most cases, it depends on the type of task.

7. Gender does not affect aging.

    Myth. Men and women age differently. Statistics indicate women live longer than men and have a higher incidence of osteoporosis. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to suffer from heart disease.

8. Certain ethnic groups live longer and healthier.

    Myth. There is diversity within ethnic groups.

9. The longer seniors live, the greater the chances are they will become severely depressed.

    Reality. As seniors live longer, there is a greater chance for clinical depression to develop.

10. Seniors avoid new technologies.

    Myth. In 1998, over 25% of computers were purchased by older adults. In fact, seniors spend more time on the Internet than 12-17 year olds.

11. Older persons are less productive.

    Myth. Older workers have less absenteeism and are more satisfied with their jobs. Competence has more to do with attitude and commitment than age.

12. Seniors learn new tasks more easily if they use the "hands-on" approach.

    Reality. Ninety percent of older adults state that they learn best by putting their hands on something and manipulating it.

13. Over half of the senior population attends church or temple on a regular basis.

    Reality. Attending church, mosque or temple is a good place for interaction for seniors.

14. There is a growing tendency for senior women to stay in the work force longer than men.

    Reality. There are 10% more women working after the age of 59 than there were in 1959.

15. Seniors like learning new tasks with their peers.

    Myth. For older adults, the preferred learning format varies with the topic under study.

16. Seniors generally rely on radio or television news programs as their source of learning.

    Myth. On the whole, 64% of older Americans almost always rely on newspapers, magazines, books, and journals when they want to learn.

17. Older adults are set in their ways.

    Myth. Marketing surveys show that over 80% of older consumers are receptive to new products and services.

18. Social Security payments contribute significantly to monthly earnings of all U.S. citizens.

    Myth. Social Security accounts for 82% percent of the income for those in the lowest fifth of the income distribution, but only for 20% of all others.

19. The median net worth of older white households is significantly greater than that of older black households.

    Reality. In 1999, median net worth among older black households was estimated to be about $13,000, compared with $181,000 among older white households.

20. The diets of seniors are better than those of the rest of the population.

    Reality. Twenty-one percent of the senior population was found to fulfill the dietary components of the Healthy Eating Index (a measure of the daily serving of fruit and milk products, and fat and sodium intake).

21. Seniors are often victims of crime.

    Myth. Seniors are much less likely to be victims of crime (3 per 1000) than persons ages 12 to 64 (45 per 1000).

22. Seniors enjoy dining out.

    Reality. Sixty-three percent of seniors go out to restaurants.

23. It is more common for older women to live alone than older men.

    Reality. Fourteen percent of men 65 to 74 live alone, while 30% of women the same age live alone; 22% of men 75 and older live alone, while 54% of women live alone.

24. Many older adults do volunteer work.

    Reality. About 16.3% of the senior population volunteer their services.

25. Missouri has a larger senior population percentage than New York.

    Reality. Thirteen percent of New York residents are 65 or older, but 13.6% of Missourians are 65 or older.

26. Seniors are interested in the stock and bond market.

    Reality. With 401(K) plans and other pension plans many seniors are interested in ways to increase their net worth.

27. The safest term to use when marketing to older adults is "senior."

    Myth. The most successful promotions market to the people being targeted and are age neutral. Many older adults dislike the terms "elderly," "senior citizen," and "retired." Keep in mind that a study conducted by the Marriott Corporation showed that most older people feel younger than their actual age by an average of 12 years.

28. Playing bingo and cards are the number one and two recreational activities for seniors.

    Myth. While playing bingo and cards are popular with some seniors, they are by no means the number one and two recreational activities for seniors. Twenty-seven percent of seniors attend movies, sports events, clubs, and group events.

29. Seniors' main concern is Social Security and Medicare.

    Myth. Seniors' main interest is family and friends. They are also interested in travel, sports, and current affairs.

30. When you turn 65, you become a senior citizen.

> *Myth. Old age begins with a decline in physical or mental ability, rather than with the arrival of a specific birthday.*

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Promoting Senior Services to Library Staff

Most library administrations and staffs will welcome and embrace the idea of developing or improving services to the older population. Acceptance by library staff of the importance of offering library services targeted to seniors is instrumental to success. Directors and managers must work with the staff to combat biases and stereotypes, and to understand the purpose and need for building services for the senior population.

While most library staffs will not have overt prejudices against older adults, there may be underlying beliefs or ideas that hinder customer service. There are several strategies to combat ageism to improve services to seniors.

First, involve staff in all aspects of developing services for older adults, including the planning stages of conducting surveys and focus groups, implementing new programs, building collections, and evaluating new services. Allowing staff participation and inclusion provides staff buy-in that ensures success.

Second, consider sending library staff to meetings and gatherings of older adult agencies. These will include meetings at local chapters of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), senior center events and planning meetings for Area Agencies on Aging (AAA). If a coalition of agencies serving seniors exists, this is an ideal opportunity for library staff to understand the role these agencies play in enhancing the quality of area seniors' lives. Obviously, it is important for the library

administration to first make contact with the sponsoring agency and request an invitation. If no meetings seem to be taking place, consider inviting representatives from several senior-serving agencies for a brown-bag lunch or an open house at the library. Consider inviting speakers from AARP or AAA to share their own experiences working with seniors. Provide opportunities for library staff to interact with seniors and the people who serve them in the community.

Third, provide training opportunities for library staff. There are several options for formal and informal training. A library-planned inservice may feature a senior expert (again, a representative from AARP or AAA) who talks in general about senior needs and the services his or her agency offers. Specialists from University Extension can provide training on general gerontology issues or intergenerational programming. Consider using the quiz presented earlier in this chapter as a tool to spark discussion about common beliefs and ideas about older adults and aging. Terra Nova Productions (*www.terranova.org*) produces videos dealing exclusively with aging related issues which can be used to educate and generate discussion. *Aging with Grace* features several older adults talking with sensitivity and wisdom about how their perceptions of themselves and their roles have changed (or not changed) as they have grown older. *The Challenge of Aging: Retrieving Spiritual Traditions* challenges contemporary cultural notions about aging; this program helps older adults and those who work with them to explore aging as a spiritual journey. Project LIFE coordinates the annual Governor's Conference on Aging each October. Contact Project LIFE staff through the agency website (*web.missouri.edu/~projlife/*) for more information. Finally, the state library and other library organizations offer continuing education events concerning senior services.

Lastly, directors, trustees and library staffs should read and discuss the American Library Association's *Guidelines for Library Service to Older Adults.* (see Appendix) This document serves as a guide for providing exemplary services and programs to meet the needs and demands of older adults.

The United Nations "Principles for Older Persons"

While physical changes vary from person to person, the one ideal that remains unyielding is that of respect and rights. On December 16, 1991, the United Nations General Assembly adopted eighteen Principles for Older Persons (Resolution 46/91), divided into five broad categories. Listed below are the summarized principles that apply to library services. Adhering to these principles will create an environment in which seniors and the entire library community will benefit.

1. Independence

- Older persons should have the opportunity to work or have access to other income-generating opportunities.

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- Older persons should have access to appropriate educational and training programs.

2. Participation

- Older persons should remain integrated in society, participate actively in the formulation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being, and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations.

- Older persons should be able to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities.

3. Care

- Older persons should have access to social and legal services to enhance their autonomy, protection, and care.

- Older persons should be able to utilize appropriate levels of institutional care providing protection, rehabilitation, and social and mental stimulation in a humane and secure environment.

- Older persons should be able to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms when residing in any shelter, care, or treatment facility, including full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs, and privacy and for the right to make decisions about their care and the quality of their lives.

4. Self-fulfillment

- Older persons should be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential.

- Older persons should have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual, and recreational resources of society.

5. Dignity

- Older persons should be treated fairly, regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability, or other status, and be valued independently of their economic contribution.

Lifelong Learning & Quality of Life

Research shows that biologically based mental abilities, such as visual flexibility, decrease as people age, due to declines in functions of the central nervous system. However, higher order mental processes which are less dependent on biological functions, such as creativity and problem solving actually increase over time for adults of all ages.

Thus, perception, which relies on the nervous system to process stimuli, declines with age. Older people can become confused or irritated by visual or auditory stimuli that change rapidly. Memory also tends to decline as people age. However, people who exercise their memories tend to retain more.

Research has demonstrated the human brain has the ability to make new connections, absorb new data, and acquire new skills throughout its lifetime. As people get older, they may learn skills in a different manner. Older adults need to work at their own pace, practice new skills, and, perhaps most important of all, avoid embarrassment when they cannot keep up with the speed of their younger counterparts.

In *Successful Aging,* authors Rowe and Kahn state that our society is still "age-graded," and our institutions have not caught up with the "new reality." According to this "new reality," life consists of more than just the three compartmentalized periods of education, work, and retirement; there is also time for lifelong learning. Programs such as Elderhostel have recognized the necessity and importance of lifelong learning for some time. Indeed, for more than 25 years, Elderhostel has organized interesting and educational courses in universities and colleges around the world, allowing seniors to come together to share their passion for learning and camaraderie. Likewise, there has also been the establishment of the Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILR). Colleges and universities hosting these institutes are growing, and now number three hundred nationally.

AARP Study: How and Why Older Adults Learn

In 1999, the American Association of Retired Persons conducted a survey on lifelong learning with over 1,000 Americans age 50 and over. It is evident from the results that older adults want to learn and are interested in a variety of subjects. Listed below are the highlights from what AARP reported in the study.

- 64% almost always use newspapers, magazines, and journals.

- 56% who were surveyed on the Internet said they use Internet sources to find answers to their questions.

- 90% agree they learn best by watching, then thinking about a task before trying it.

- 90% agree that they learn best by putting their hands on something and manipulating it to figure it out.

- There is no consensus on the format older adults use to learn most effectively. However, there is agreement seniors liked to learn in loosely-structured groups, in workshop settings, or by teaching themselves.

- 55% want to learn a task and use the skills immediately.

- 93% want to learn to keep up with what's going on in the world.

- 92% want to learn solely for spiritual or personal growth.

- 91% want to learn for the simple joy of learning.

- 62% want to learn more about a favorite hobby or pastime.

- 52% enjoy learning things which will advance their skills.

- 51% wish to learn things which will help them enjoy life more.

- 49% wish to learn more about personal health.

- 46% wish to learn more about managing stress.

- Less than 50% of those surveyed said they would buy or borrow computer teaching programs or audio or video tapes to learn a new skill.

- Less than 50% of those surveyed said they would seek out classes at a university to learn a new task.

- On average, respondents are willing to spend a maximum of $101 for a learning experience.

- 17% had to relearn parenting skills for a new child or grandchild.

- 12% (ages 50-74) had an adult child move back into their house.

- 50% became caregivers to a parent or another older adult.

The AARP survey revealed that the lifelong learning experiences holding the most appeal for seniors were those taught in environments that allowed adults control over all aspects of the learning process and were not expensive. Adults wish to learn for the simple joy of learning, to enhance their spiritual growth, and to keep up with what is going on in the world.

Older adults also prefer learning methods which are easy to access, require small investments of time and money, and allow them to begin immediately. One fact that is quite apparent is that print media such as books, magazines, and journals are still the learning tools of choice. Furthermore, older adults prefer to learn in environments that will give them the opportunity for small group learning or one-on-one learning. There is no better environment to do all this than a library.

Seniors' Education Centre: Education is the Best Provision for Old Age

In a study conducted by the Seniors' Education Centre, a University Extension of the University of Regina, researchers found that older adults wanted to learn for many of the same reasons conveyed in the AARP study. In addition to these findings, their

study pointed out that seniors wanted to learn in order to maintain a "margin of power." They concluded the biggest barriers to seniors not participating in learning experiences were financial restraints and low literacy levels. Nevertheless, according to most demographics, as baby boomers move toward their senior years, this barrier will undoubtedly change.

Libraries as a Source for Lifelong Learning

Connie Van Fleet notes "the American public library is committed to service to all individuals, regardless of educational level, socioeconomic status, or age. Its multi-faceted informational, educational, social, and cultural roles provide an ideal philosophical foundation for learning opportunities for older adults."

She points out that libraries can modify the basic services they are already offering to enhance services to older adults. Furthermore, it is important for staff to recognize and focus on the following ideals:

- Promoting information and resources on aging and its implications not only to older adults, but also to all persons interested in the aging process.

- Providing excellence in service to older adult learners by renewing their knowledge of resources available and by updating referral resources.

- Becoming familiar with popular journals on aging and organizing displays on the subject of aging.

- Updating information referral resources of appropriate agencies and institutions on aging.

- Providing readers' advisors who recognize the diverse interests of the older adults.

- Offering diverse programming that will serve different needs and focus on inter-agency cooperation.

- Planning outreach activities for individuals who may not be able to visit the library.

- Learning the demographics and diversity of the older adult population.

- Knowing the learning abilities and styles of older adults.

- Acquiring a thorough knowledge of the local community and its resources.

Staff members who remain focused on these tenets will create a library atmosphere in which seniors will feel welcome, and will encourage them to return to the library as time and needs allow. Seniors who feel welcome in the library and receive the services they require will also encourage their friends and family to become library users.

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Libraries Change Lives!

The slogan, "Libraries Change Lives," applies to everyone, including older adults. Libraries have the opportunity to give seniors the tools they need for continued life-long learning, to fulfill dreams, to keep current with the world, and to continue to live independently. Libraries can do this by offering older patrons free, high-quality, educational and entertaining programs and services.

Library staff will find the experience of reaching out and touching a senior's life rewarding, offering themselves a wonderful opportunity for professional and personal growth, while reminding seniors of who they are, and who they can be.

Resources

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